

COVER PAGE

The Visit

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~ 663 words

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The Visit

Slowly, with awkward effort, he rises from his armchair to greet me. His smile reveals crooked yellow teeth, edged in brown. His hand is bony, mottled, swollen at the knuckles, wracked with large knobby protuberances. I take care not to squeeze too hard.

I'm the only visitor he's had today. The only one he will have. Maybe all week. We sit down.

"How've you been?" I ask. A stupid question. He's conscious. He's here. That's the sum of it. He sits all day and gazes out the window. He can't see much through those bulbous, bloodshot, beclouded eyes that used to be some color or other, bluish I think. He tells me he's been looking at the tulips. There hasn't been a tulip blooming for weeks. It's peonies now. But I smile and agree that the tulips are nice.

"Wait," he says. "I'm wrong. Those are peonies." He pronounces it "pee-own'-eeze."

"Yes."

His nose is swollen, purple with puddled blood. It looks sore. The skin on his face is infinitely wrinkled, even in repose, like brown rice paper. His lips are flaccid; the lower one hangs away limp, in a permanent pout. His gray hair is coarse and sparse. A dark tuft spurts from one fleshy farmer's ear; I notice it while he's fiddling in the other with a fulvous hearing device, the color of flesh on a corpse, which squeals and whistles as he adjusts it. He begins to tell me a story about Mrs. McCain, who sometimes helps him onto the veranda on warm days.

"A nice lady," he says.

I've heard the story before. I guess he's settled on one or two stories. He tells them whenever somebody comes by. Afterward, he gets sleepy. I wonder if he wears diapers.

"She said I was getting as strong as I am good-looking," he says with a chuckle. A bit of spittle appears in the corner of his mouth.

Sometimes he can't lift himself out of his chair.

"Here," he offers his arm. "Feel this."

Underneath the rough material of his coat I feel his bicep. It's as big around as my wrist.

"She says some night she's going to sneak into my room," he smiles.

Mrs. McCain looks like a manatee. If she snuck into my room I'd sic the dog on her.

He's reminiscing now. "I remember one night in college...what was her name?"

There's a long pause as he searches his shrunken mind for a clue. But nothing appears.

"Oh, well," he says. "It doesn't matter."

I agree.

"We were living in a dormitory."

"Uh-huh."

"They kept us apart in those days. The boys and the girls."

I nod.

"Oh, we went on dates sometimes. Maybe four of us would walk down to the ice cream parlor on Saturday night."

"Uh-huh."

"If a girl really liked you she might let you take a sip of her soda through your straw."

This wasn't a euphemism.

"Mrs. McCain makes me a milkshake now and then."

With barium in it, I suppose.

"You like that, huh?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

“Good. Listen, I have to be getting along. I have a meeting.” This is a lie. But half an hour from now he won’t know I was here. Tomorrow he’ll think it was someone else who came. If he remembers at all. Maybe the girl whose name he’s forgotten. The one whose stuff he never tasted. Anyway it won’t matter. Nothing matters now.

As I walk down the sidewalk toward the parking lot I feel as though I’ve emerged from a crypt. I bend down and lift a heavy peony blossom to my nostrils. Its brilliant vermilion petals are waxy, cool and silken against my face. It has a vaguely sweet odor. Then I look out across the parking lot, over the young trees thick with early summer verdure. The gray hills float silently in the distance. The sky is an opalescent blue, veiled with wispy curtains of white like his obnubilated eyes.